

# **Evaluation of the Status, Distribution and Habitats of Flathead Catfish in Iowa's Rivers**

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Surveys show that nearly half of angler effort in Iowa is focused on rivers and streams, and more time is spent fishing for catfish than any other type of fish. In recent years there has been a perceived decline in flathead catfish populations in some Iowa rivers, particularly in the number of large fish available to anglers. Some anglers believe that more restrictive bag limits, further restrictions on methods of taking flathead catfish, and modifications of commercial harvest regulations are needed to improve flathead catfish abundance and size structure. Fisheries biologists in Iowa do not feel they know enough about flathead catfish populations, and the factors impacting these populations, to determine whether regulations can produce or enhance trophy catfish fisheries.

A statewide study was launched in 2003 to develop recommendations for managing flathead catfish populations in Iowa's rivers. While there have been investigations of flathead catfish in the Des Moines, Skunk, and Mississippi Rivers in the past, this study is the first coordinated, statewide effort to monitor and assess the well being of flathead catfish populations. The study is collecting current information on population status in the Mississippi River and 12 sites on the Cedar, Iowa, North Raccoon, and Des Moines Rivers. Data is being collected on age structure, growth rates, length frequency, and relative abundance of flathead catfish populations in these rivers. Twenty-nine flathead catfish were implanted with radio-transmitters in the Iowa River to monitor movement of these fish and identify seasonally important habitats. The study is also determining the most efficient methods for collecting information on flathead catfish populations in Iowa's rivers. This will allow better monitoring of populations, and the impacts of management actions on flathead catfish in Iowa.

Changes in Iowa's landscape over the last 150 years are numerous and have profoundly affected interior river and stream resources in the state. These past and present impacts have undoubtedly affected flathead catfish populations in these rivers and streams, but the nature of these affects are not known. Our study will seek to determine habitat factors that are critical to the well being of flathead catfish populations, and identify ways in which these habitats can be protected or enhanced.

While the commercial fishery for flathead catfish on the Mississippi River has been monitored for years, little is known about the sport fishery for the species in Iowa's rivers. Our study will use surveys targeted at flathead catfish anglers, as well as other methods, to gather information needed to address concerns about the impact of angler harvest on the species.